

Big Boned: Exploring the Absence of Fat Children in Children's Literature

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ABSTRACT

In this study, I pushed to understand the presence and purpose of fat children in children's literature. With the rising "obesity" panic, we teach children younger and younger that their bodies will and should be policed. One of the most common ways to do this is through media easily accessed by children. Children's books are often one of children's first introductions to morality, and young readers learn how to judge their surroundings based on what they are reading or what is being read to them. Through negative representations of fat bodies, as well as their lack of representation entirely, young readers begin formulating harmful ideas about fat bodies from an early age. This Fat Studies research explored these harmful representations of common destructive tropes and patterns of body shaming inside books aimed toward young readers by critically analyzing depictions and symbolic erasure of fat bodies inside of children's books.

INTRODUCTION

What does it say about our society when the the majority of instances of fat children within children's books are mean-spirited bullies? With characters like Augustus Gloop and Dudley Dursley, it is no wonder that generations are being conditioned to resent and despise fat bodies. However, more destructive than the negative representation of fat children in children's books is the absence of them. Waves of cultural identities are being elevated and shown in children's books nowadays with inclusions of more girl characters, more children of color, and various "alternative" family situations. Despite these progressive strides in children's literature, there still severely lacks body positivity through body representation. To study this further, I have utilized the method of critical discourse analysis.

DISCUSSION

If fiction helps characterize those we know outside of the pages, where does that leave the reader's extra-literary experience without fat bodied characters? If collocation can help challenge gender stereotypes, imagine the possibilities of challenging our preconceived notions of bodies through literature.

The erasure of fat children is symbolic, not coincidental. Preventing different sizes and shapes of children's bodies to appear in children's books is ultimately harmful and limiting to fat children. Their existences are erased and pushed aside.

The recent progression of children's literature has brought us to embrace different colors, cultures, and genders of children. When do we make the step to include bodies in this progression as well?

METHOD

Through critical discourse analysis, I was able to navigate texts to find harmful systemic and social inequities through critically questioning each text's positioning and implications. By questioning the absence of fat children in various texts, the negative social effects became clearer.

The lens of my analysis was Fat Studies—a critical field of analysis. Fat Studies operates under the truth that there is health at every size. This means that health cannot be determined just by simply looking at a body. Especially within the context of children, Fat Studies attempts to destroy the idea that fat bodies exist only to be fixed or to be scolded. I used Fat Studies books and journals with theories and discourse to analyze classic, canonical pieces of children's literature. To critically explore the social and political implications of these texts, I engaged theories by noted Fat Studies scholars such as Rothblum and Solovay, editors of *The Fat Studies Reader* (2009). By using Fat Studies as a critical lens for analysis, I explored the invisibility of fat bodies inside pieces of children's literature to further understand what dangerous and non-inclusive ideas were being implied.

RESULTS

1. By creating a space for fat children within children's literature, we can start teaching children that non-normative bodies are not implicitly problematic, unhealthy, or undeserving of love. As Dr. Linda Bacon (2008) says, "Science and reason do not support the value of a weight focus" (p. 320).

2. The invisibility of fat children in children's literature creates a barrier for children. Kids are easily influenced by media, and so the inclusion of diverse identities and bodies will be extremely helpful in teaching children acceptance and understanding.

3. Jane Sunderland (2011) refers to the idea of collocation when considering the influence of literature on children. Collocations has "the potential to draw on gender stereotypes" (p. 71), which ultimately allows writers to "encourage associations between phenomena in the fictional world and those of the readers' extra-literary experience" (Knowles and Malmkjaer, 1996: 71).

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